*Published in* [Variaciones Borges 46, *November 2018*](https://www.borges.pitt.edu/product/66)

*Online:* <http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.library.emory.edu/apps/doc/A563572019/LitRC?u=emory&sid=LitRC&xid=515f3903>

**Borges y Yo, Eiron and Alazon: Irony in “The Library of Babel” and “Pierre Menard**”

Borges made a habit of differing from himself. “El otro” and “Borges y yo” are only the most overt examples from a corpus that constantly played with his biography, his beliefs, and his proper name. In his “non-fiction,” this *Auseinselbstsetzung* takes the form of self-contradiction, asserting opposed theses in his own name, celebrating romantico-mystical union with the absolute together with the difference-from-self that makes it impossible. In his fiction, this disseminative impulse takes the form of irony. No difference could be more radical—in the ironic text, not only is every word compromised or crossed-out, but the absent center (what we blithely call the narrator or author) from which the narrative seems to issue is also split. Nor is Borges’s irony the relatively simple sort of satire that lampoons a naïve view in order to place itself and the canny reader among the enlightened few. He straddled this divide as well, identifying himself with both poles of the ironic text, as though the ignorance he mocked was nonetheless, ineluctably, his own. This even comes across in the relentless humility of his interviews, where he constantly expresses feeling both inferior next to and less vain than—Borges.

 The temptation, perhaps the necessity, of avoiding or effacing these self-contradictions is manifest in the most prevalent readings of Borges. The ideas considered most characteristic of his style, such as the combinatoric exhaustibility of language from “The Library of Babel” or the context-dependence of meaning from “Pierre Menard: Author of the Quixote” are precisely the ideas he relentlessly ironized in those very stories. It is hard to say whether Borges would be disappointed or satisfied to see that his narrators were taken literally. After all, one must always ask—which Borges?

The narrator of “The Library of Babel,” a librarian living within its stacks, relentlessly asserts its totality and infinity.[[1]](#footnote-1) It contains, according to him, not only all possible permutations of its character set, but all possible meaning; it has existed always, will continue forever, and extends infinitely in space as well. Of course, none of these propositions could ever be verified by a creature conditioned by finitude, limited in space and time. Our narrator takes them on faith. There are several indications that Borges treats these claims ironically, not in order to denigrate the library (as though it could house all possible expression but falls short), but to show that totalizing expression is an impossible ideal. Despite all the ways Borges laces these ideas with irony in the story, it is rare to find critics willing to question the veracity of his narrator.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Though the narrator makes the facile equation that the library contains “all possible combinations of the twenty-odd orthographical symbols” and therefore “all that it is given to express, in all languages” (*Labyrinths* 54), there are traces throughout the story of both the accidental and essential impossibility of this exhaustion of language. Borges treats the idea of the library’s twenty-five-character set with characteristic duplicity, the story makes reference to other alphabets, and includes many characters from outside its strict limits. These are its accidental limits, the extent to which the letter, signifier, or mark exerts an influence on signification; the narrative shows by its irony that, far from expressing all possible meaning, the library’s bounded character set cannot even give expression to this brief fiction. Beyond these accidental limits, Borges also gestures toward the essential impossibility of the saturation of meaning, which resides in every letter’s endless differing from itself, like the body of this ironic narrative.

 The attempt to track down which twenty-two letters Borges or his narrator had in mind reveals many of the absurdities of his claim. The number twenty-two must have suggested itself to Borges because of his interest in the Cabbalistic treatment of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. For example, in his essay “On the Cult of Books,” Borges attributes the following sentence, which could be mistaken for an affirmation from our narrator, to the Cabbalistic creation story of the *Sepher Yetzirah:* “Twenty-two letters: God drew them, engraved them, combined them, weighed them, permutated them, and with them produced everything that is and everything that will be” (360-361).[[3]](#footnote-3) A divine creation consisting of the permutation of twenty-two letters has an obvious resonance with our story; nevertheless, the alphabet used in the library is clearly Roman.[[4]](#footnote-4)

 Borges has offered one account of a set of twenty-two letters capable of reproducing all possible text, in his essay “The Total Library.” Presumably starting from the 30-letter Spanish alphabet, Borges removes the duplicative double letters (*ch*, *ll*, *rr*) as well as the less unnecessary *ñ.* Removing *k* and *w*, foreign letters appearing only in loan words, leaves us with twenty-four letters. Borges’s account seems to pick up here: “The alphabet could relinquish the *q* (which is completely superfluous), the *x* (which is an abbreviation), and all capital letters” (215). In his introduction to *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, Borges cited this essay as an account of the true authors of “The Library of Babel.” Here he attributes both the idea and the dimensions of a twenty-two-letter essential character set to Kurd Lasswitz, “By means of similar simplifications, Lasswitz arrives at twenty-five symbols [*símbolos suficientes*] (twenty-two letters, the space, the period, the comma), whose recombinations and repetitions encompass everything possible to express in all languages” (216).[[5]](#footnote-5)

 As is typical of Borges’s writing, the textual web of this essay, his short story, and what we might incautiously call the true history is inextricably complex. At the very least, we can with some certainty refute John Sturrock, who assumes that Kurd Lasswitz must have been one of Borges’s inventions, given that his name roughly translates to “weary wits” (100). He existed, was a German proto-science fiction author, and wrote “The Universal Library,” a short story Borges rightly cites as an influence, though perhaps for the wrong reasons. The protagonists of Lasswitz’s story share with Borges’s narrator an interest in a subset of the library’s contents: for example, the lost works of Tacitus or the true and false catalogues of the library. While Lasswitz has one of his characters say, “your readers will conclude that this is an excerpt from one of the superfluous volumes of the Universal Library” (243), Borges’s narrator observes that “this wordy and useless epistle already exists in one of the […] innumerable hexagons” (*Labyrinths* 57). One thing Borges’s library contains, though, that is definitely lacking from that of Lasswitz, is a 25-character orthographical system. Lasswitz allows for lower- and upper-case letters, ample punctuation and scientific notation, and ultimately settles on 100 symbols. The temptation to tweak Borges’s text ever so slightly presents itself, when we realize that Theodor Wolff, also mentioned in the essay, actually did propose reducing the character set to 25 in his 1929 *Der Wettlauf mit der Schildkröte*. After all, Borges first writes, “Lasswitz's basic idea is the same as Carroll's, but the elements of his game are the universal orthographic symbols, not the words of a language. The number of such elements […] is reduced and can be reduced even further” (“Total Library”215), which seems to acknowledge that Lasswitz accounted for more symbols. Later in the same paragraph, though, this is contradicted by his statement, “Lasswitz arrives at twenty-five symbols” (215). Could he have meant to cite Wolff here? The situation is further complicated when we recognize that Wolff proposes a different 25 characters. Like Borges, he eliminates majuscules, numbers, and the despised *q,* but proposes restoring the classical union of *i* and *j,* replacing *w* with *uu* (corresponding to its name) or *vv* (corresponding to its shape), and declares z an abbreviation of *sc* or *cs* (Ley 246). No matter how we attempt to reconfigure Borges’s text, we have to acknowledge some perfidy or betrayal in his attempts to disclaim authorship and give credit to his predecessors. This play of novelty and repetition, invention and discovery, always disguising and dissimulating one as the other, is one way of understanding the function of infidelity and irony in Borges’s writings on the universal library, and in his corpus as a whole.

 The situation becomes even more complex when we turn to the text of the short story. Before we reach its first sentence, the title confronts us with capital letters, and the epigraph not only contains numbers but speaks of another character set altogether. “By this art you may contemplate the variation of the 23 letters” refers to the classical Latin alphabet. The story goes on to use several of the excluded capital letters, digits, punctuation marks, and diacritics. A note from the “editor” offers little help:

The original manuscript does not contain digits or capital letters. The punctuation has been limited to the comma and the period. These two signs, the space, and the twenty-two letters of the alphabet are the twenty-five symbols considered sufficient by this unknown author [*son los veinticinco símbolos suficientes que enumera el desconocido*]. (*Editor’s Note.)* (*Labyrinths* 53).

The apparition of this editor creates another division within the text: everything we read is the redaction of an absent original. And the editor’s liminal position—How have they come by this manuscript if they are outside the world of the library, or how have they gotten it to us if they are within?—adds another layer between us and the ever more elusive author. Their mention of the “twenty-two letters of the alphabet” and of the “*símbolos suficientes*” suggests that they are within the library’s world and its ideology (but then, how do they even know of majuscules and digits?). Notice that Irby has taken the potentially unfaithful step of attributing the idea of sufficiency to the narrator. Di Giovanni does the same (“found to be sufficient by the unknown author”), Hurley is closer to the original (“sufficient symbols that our unknown author is referring to”), and Kerrigan is as usual the only one who offers a literal translation (“sufficient symbols enumerated by the unknown author”).[[6]](#footnote-6) The irony inherent in this story, which claims 25 symbols should be enough to represent all possible language while simultaneously demonstrating they are insufficient to express this short story, refutes any attribution of this idea of sufficiency to Borges. It rather seems that he has, as is customary, multiplied the layers and masks, creating a liminal figure who seems to bring Borges one step closer to the story’s inside, while in truth shifting him yet one layer further away. And what to make of the “Borges” who signed a work of “non-fiction” two years earlier claiming the same idea that this fiction refutes or gently ironizes? Fictionalizing a seemingly non-fictional discourse while developing the truth in fiction is precisely the sort of deconstruction definitive of Borges’s style.

 The forbidden letters that appear within the library’s texts, or at least on their spines (*dorso—*not, as Hurley would have it, their front covers), leave us with the most to ponder. It’s easy to dismiss the editor’s addition of capital letters in *Trueno peinado* and *El calambre de yeso* by mentally inserting the lower-case letter, but what to make of *Axaxaxas mlö?* If Borges meant to eliminate the *x,* could this have been acsacsacsas, or ashashashas, or ajajajas? *x* is perhaps the least suitable letter for Borges to choose as irrelevant (as an “abbreviation”) given its regional and historical vicissitudes in Spanish pronunciation. At the very least, this reminds us that every sign and every letter is determined by a context to which it itself contributes—none can be removed or substituted losslessly. There’s much more to be said about this phrase, which comes from an imagined language in Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” and means something like “onstreaming it mooned.” Just to indicate the trailhead of an interpretation of this intertextuality, the idealism of Tlön exemplified by this phrase draws into question even the most basic assertion of identity, which is fundamental to the atomist claims of our narrator (his representation of language as a set of indivisible elements). That the letter is no atom, that it divides from itself, is the very form and function of the umlaut that makes its appearance here. Its form: the two dots, like a splitting particle; its function: to shift the sound and signification of a letter, to make one letter no longer the same as itself.

 This insufficiency of the library’s character set—that there will always be some characters left out of even the most capacious group, and that one or more characters can never substitute for others without some loss or gain—is what I referred to before as its accidental limitations. The essential insufficiency resides in the nature of a sign. Only if language has an atomic structure, if its letters and marks are indivisible, can the narrator’s second axiom (“*the orthographical symbols are twenty-five in number*”) be upheld. But the narrative itself draws into question the self-identity of these symbols, in the sentence immediately preceding:

To perceive the distance between the divine and the human, it is enough to compare these crude wavering symbols which my fallible hand scrawls on the cover of a book, with the organic letters inside: punctual, delicate, perfectly black [*negrísimas*], inimitably symmetrical. (*Labyrinths* 52-3)

In order for divine and human writing to be distinguishable, the “twenty-five” symbols have to each be more or less than one in never being at one with themselves. In order to be recognized as letters at all, each must be capable of separating from itself and being identified as both the same and different, despite the narrator’s dream of inimitability. Without the self-identity of the letter, the saturation of meaning is an essential impossibility, and the narrator’s dream of totality is dependent on the symbols that subvert it.

 “The Library of Babel,” then, should not be read as a story about the exhaustibility or exhaustion of language, as John Barth, Foucault, and so many others have done. Everything recognizable as a difference, passing itself off as a new word or a new work, is to that very extent permutable in its origins. But there is ceaseless novelty in repetition, in the differences for which we have no name and no mark. Borges referred to this sort of differing-from-self when he wrote that, “Literature is not exhaustible, for the sufficient and simple reason that a single book is not” (*Other Inquisitions* 164). The letter, phrase, or work that differs from itself is like the ironic text, which becomes its opposite and everything else without a single mark of difference.

*Pierre Menard*

A greater share of readers have recognized some irony in the narrative frame of “Pierre Menard: Author of the *Quixote*.” This is likely because of the overt anti-Semitism and other prejudices expressed by the story’s narrator in its opening paragraph. Most readers who identify this irony see it as limited to these opening gestures, and interpret it as a satire on French or Argentinian literary circles. As Monegal sees it, “The story is presented as a parody of the kind of article written in defense of a misunderstood genius by one of his followers…It becomes a brilliant parody of French literary life, with its touches of bigotry, anti-Semitism, and adulation of the upper classes” (328). Jorge Luis Castello also notes how sinister these prejudices are in their context, being written in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War. While he doesn’t make the connection explicitly, this offers the means to connect the criticism implied by the ironic narrative frame with Argentinian social circles, which Borges frequently denounced at the time for their fascist sympathies and anti-Semitism.[[7]](#footnote-7)

 But the scope of Borges’s irony encompasses much more than social or literary circles at home or abroad. Efraín Kristal has noted, in a brilliant analysis delivered during his UCLA 118th Faculty Research Lecture, that the narrator’s prejudiced comments echo statements by Erich Ludendorff, supreme commander of the German army during WWI, co-conspirator with Hitler, and lifelong racist and anti-Semite. Kristal also demonstrates Borges’s degree of familiarity with Ludendorff’s thought; Borges had, in the years preceding his writing of “Pierre Menard,” written multiple criticisms of Ludendorff’s prejudiced militarism.[[8]](#footnote-8) Our Ludendorff-like narrator opens his necrological account by promising an authentic summary of Menard’s oeuvre, and invoking the “altos testimonios” of his high-society patrons to supplement his “pobre autoridad” (Borges, “Pierre Menard” 42). The obsession with genealogy is a troubling similarity between our narrator and the National Socialists—beyond a mere criticism of the social prejudices or pretentious tastes of his literary circle, Borges’s irony takes as its target the continuity of certain representations of prestige and authenticity with the most violent forms of national and political identity formation.

On the basis of this connection, we can expand the scope of Borges’s irony to include some of the most celebrated themes of the story. This obsession with genetic authenticity places in question the narrator’s account of Menard’s most famous non-work, the *Quixote.* According to our narrator, Menard did not want to mechanically copy his chosen text, nor did he want to reconstruct Cervantes’s context to rediscover the work’s original impetus there. Rather, he chose to operate by “continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the Quixote *through the experiences of Pierre Menard*” (Borges, “Pierre Menard” 91). It is on the basis of this method that our narrator feels justified in reading the *Quixote* as the product of a twentieth-century French symbolist. But, if Menard has demonstrated anything, it is that the moment of creation of a text places no limits on how it can be read—the text by necessity breaks from any and every context. The idea that it remains tied to its creator and their intentions is precisely the sort of geneticism that Borges is ironizing throughout the story, in so many forms.

James Irby goes further than other readers in tying the narrator’s prejudices to his reading of Menard’s corpus, and notes an interesting progression in the narrator’s views. Irby writes:

The commentator certainly begins as one [a vain reader], opening with his pedantic, bigoted, racist claims to possess the only truth about Menard’s work. But what happens along the way, where has our snob gone by the end, when his commentary calmly and ecumenically proposes we read the *De imitatione Christi* as if it had been written by the anti-Semite Céline or the renegade Catholic Joyce? (“Some Notes”)

In this spirit, we can mark three stages in the narrator’s methodology: 1) The assumption that the meaning of Menard’s *Quixote* stems from the context and intentions of its creation 2) His considering the possibility, on the basis of the two-and-a-fraction chapters written by Menard, that the entire book can be read as though it was written by Menard (“Shall I confess that I often imagine that he did complete it, and that I read the Quixote—the *entire* Quixote—as if Menard had conceived it?” (92)) 3) The concluding paragraph, where the possibility of reading any work as written by any author, “the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution,” comes to the fore (95). These stages are a progressive severing of the text’s natal bond to the moment of its creation. Whether we advance from an ironic stance to Borges’s true position on the subject will require a more careful analysis.

Though this unmooring places in question any search for the historical predecessors, namesakes, or models of Menard, Borges shapes Pierre Menard’s biography to form historical connections that are in turn complicated by the story’s irony. In *Out of Context* and “‘His Insect-Like Handwriting,’” Daniel Balderston has unearthed the fascinating resonances between the Pierre Menard of Borges’s story and a contemporary, eponymous psychoanalyst and graphologist. Among the noteworthy similarities in their style, Balderston points out that the historical Menard’s method included tracing the handwriting of his analysand, blurring the lines between analysis and forgery (*Out of Context* 38). Is it any wonder, given Lacan’s focus on the agency of the letter in the unconscious, that Menard’s son Augustin became a Lacanian analyst practicing in Nîmes (“Insect-Like Handwriting” 126)? Monegal also notes a Louis Ménard (whom Rosa Pellicer claims is the father or grandfather of the graphologist Pierre (243)), whose literary games included authoring lost classics such as Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Unbound*, almost sneaking his own composition into a collected works of Diderot, and an anachronistic reading practice that blended the works of Homer and Shakespeare (123). Borges has offered one hint as to how he chose the name—as Bioy Casares recounts, “Dice que eligió ese nombre porque había más de un Ménard en la literature francesa y quería dar la impresión del *dejà vu* [He says he chose that name because there was more than one Ménard in French literature and he wanted to give the impression of *dejà vu.*]” (Bioy Casares 1394). No doubt, Borges could have produced this effect with any number of names, and it does not efface the fascinating parallels between his creation and the historical Ménards. Still, it also suggests that what most motivated Borges was this feeling his character was temporally out of place, a repetition of an uncertain original.

Several historical resonances from the bibliography of Borges’s Pierre Menard tie him to a separate author, Paul Valéry. In “A Modern Master,” Paul de Man notes their similarities, including an early sonnet Menard published in *La conque*, where several of Valéry’s early poems appeared. De Man lends greater weight to their dissimilarities, including an invective against Valéry (we are told, however, that this represented the opposite of its author’s true opinion and represented his ironic tendency to write things he didn’t believe) as well as his transposition into alexandrines of Valéry’s “*Le cimetiére marin,*” whose decasyllabic meter was considered essential by its author. De Man concludes, “we can no longer doubt that we are dealing with Valéry’s anti-self, in other words, Monsieur Teste” (58). Valéry is mentioned in one of Borges’s essays, a piece with Menardian resonances that can help us to understand why Menard is the author’s anti-type. In “Coleridge’s Flower,” Borges quotes Valéry’s invocation of a universal author: “The history of literature should not be the history of authors and the course of their careers or of the career of their works, but rather the history of the Spirit as the producer or consumer of literature; such a history could be written without mentioning a single writer” (240). The essay concludes with a vision of literature that coincides with the final evocations of the narrator of “Pierre Menard:”

For the classical mind, literature is the essential thing, not individuals. George Moore and James Joyce incorporated into their works pages and sentences of others; Oscar Wilde used to give plots away for others to develop; both procedures, though apparently contradictory, reveal an identical sense of art, an ecumenical, impersonal perception […] Those who carefully copy a writer do so impersonally, because they equate that writer with literature. (242)

If this is Borges’s ultimate position, and one derived from Valéry’s reading practice, why is Menard an anti-Valéry?

Of course, we can be no more certain of finding Borges taking his true position in his non-fiction than his fiction. Two possible readings of the conclusion of “Pierre Menard” present themselves: 1) the substitution of texts and authors will lead toward the Valerian Spirit who gathers all history in an eternal unity out of which all human endeavor speaks only to say the same, 2) the chaos of perspectivality (reading every text from the point of view of every author, real or unreal) never comes to stop in even the promise of a unified perspective, offering instead ceaseless dissemination and the lack of self-identity. These positions can be summarized as Valerian and anti-Valerian; given that our narrator’s presentation of them is too brief to establish which he holds to, it is impossible to say whether he has emerged from ironic naivete to enlightenment, or even whether either position promises such an escape. If Borges shows us anything, it is rather that both positions insinuate their opposites and ironize themselves.[[9]](#footnote-9) Such an instability would also eliminate the possibility of a linear, genetic derivation of the two positions such as the one the narrator attempts when he describes Menard as, “a *Symboliste* from Nîmes, a devotee essentally [*sic*] of Poe—who begat Baudelaire, who begat Mallarmé, who begat Valéry, who begat M. Edmond Teste” (Borges, “Pierre Menard” 92).

This aporia of identity and difference, which manifests itself as irony in Borges’s short story, appears as self-contradiction in his “non-fiction.” Despite his celebration of the “impersonal,” “ecumenical” reading method in the essay on “Coleridge’s Flower,” a more disseminative view of the practice of reading can be found elsewhere in his work. We can turn, for example, to his writings on translation, a practice intimately related both to reading and to the literary appropriation undertaken by Pierre Menard.[[10]](#footnote-10) On the one hand, Borges at times justifies his translation practice (which, as Efraín Kristal has brilliantly documented, was inventively unfaithful even to his own work) by invoking the vision of literature as a unified progress unfolding across authors and languages. For example, Borges has said in interviews, “An artist cares about the perfectibility of the work, and not the fact that it may have originated from himself or from others,” (qtd. in Kristal, *Invisible Work* 9). On the other hand, Borges will also justify this practice not only by arguing against the perfectibility of the individual work (as though it progressed toward the form intended by a universal spirit), but by arguing even against its self-identity, suggesting in a certain sense that it has never existed, at least not as a whole or idea to be repeated (let alone perfected), “To assume that every recombination of elements is necessarily inferior to its original form is to assume that a draft nine is necessarily inferior to draft H—for there can only be drafts. The concept of ‘definitive text’ corresponds only to religion or exhaustion” (qtd. in Kristal, *Invisible Work* 9). This perspective effaces the authority of the individual, historically situated author over the text, without inscribing the text in a higher power.

Traditionally, the theory of irony divides the figure into an *eiron* and an *alazon*, a reference to Socratic dialogues in which a cunningly ignorant discutant (the *eiron*)would undermine the authority of the naively confident *alazon*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Borges’s irony deconstructs this division; it demonstrates the interdependence of these two positions, always locating them in the same (or in a no-longer-self-same) subject. The best example of this is the frequency with which Borges identifies himself with his ironically deluded characters through the inclusion of autobiographical details in his stories. Borges wrote “The Library of Babel” while sitting among the stacks of the municipal library where he worked, at an age when his eyesight had already begun to dim. He insisted in later interviews that the dimensions of the Library of Babel’s shelves and books were taken from the room he was sitting in as he wrote, and the librarian-narrator who pens the story laments that, “my eyes can hardly decipher what I write” (Borges, *Labyrinths* 52). Daniel Balderston, in “‘His Insect-Like Handwriting,’” has noted the autobiographical resonances of the final footnote of “Pierre Menard,” “I recall his square-ruled notebooks, his black crossings-out, his peculiar typographical symbols, and his insect-like handwriting” (Borges, “Pierre Menard” 95). Borges often wrote his stories in notebooks of graph paper (though the existing copy of “Pierre Menard” is in an accountant’s ledger), he included characters from symbolic logic to note uncertainties in his manuscripts to which he would return, and had a minute handwriting that could certainly be described as insectoid. One should also note, in this corpus defined by its internal differences, the etymology of the ever articulate in-sect. While these autobiographical details attach to Menard, not the narrator, there is enough ambiguity surrounding Menard’s understanding of his task to interpret the autobiographical gesture similarly in this story. In both cases, Borges identifies himself with the victim of his own irony, in a manner suggesting that his characters’ delusions are not accidental failings but expressions of a necessary duplicity and undecidability.

Given this inevitable reassertion of the ideas he ironized, Borges might in fact be pleased to see how frequently his narrators were taken literally. The most common interpretations of Menard’s act of inventive repetition[[12]](#footnote-12) rely on formulations that approach the untenable initial ideas of the story’s narrator. That idea, we’ll recall, was that the *Quixote* could be read as the product of a twentieth-century French symbolist only after it had been written by an author fully conscious of belonging to that time, place, and genre. The recurrent emphasis among critics on the context-dependence of meaning and the role of the reader in shaping it are precisely the ideas that Borges’s story undermines. Hans Robert Jauss cited the story as a foundational text of reception theory in “The Theory of Reception: A Retrospective of its Unrecognized Prehistory.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Numerous readers have invoked his reading or its vocabulary, including Castillo, Giskin, and Silvia Dapía.[[14]](#footnote-14) Giskin offers a paradigmatic statement on the relationship of reader and context:

Through Menard’s recreation of the *Quixote* in a different time and place from Cervantes’ original, Borges implies the simple yet disturbing supposition that the meaning of literary works is entirely dependent on the varying historical and social contexts in which they are read. Simple because it seems obvious that context plays an enormous part in the determination of meaning of texts; complex and disturbing in its suggestion that literary meaning is constructed through mental processes irrevocably tied to location and period. (103)

If either a text *or* a reader’s “mental processes” were inextricably bound to a historical context, then *every act of reading would be impossible*, including Menard’s reading of the *Quixote*. The progression we noted in the story is toward an ever less secure bond between text, reader, and context. Once we have recognized that any text can be read from any context, as the product of any real or imaginary author, it is impossible to say that either the author’s or the reader’s context is placing limitations on the text’s interpretability. Nor should we make the mistake of thinking that the work is a timeless form, allowing its self-identity to reproduce itself across history. Rather, there are only readings from within (indefinite) contexts *for the very reason* that any given text, whatever its moment of origin, forms part of any context we would hope to isolate and stand within in order to read from its point of view.[[15]](#footnote-15) Menard notes, among the factors making his task “virtually impossible,” the fact that among the events shaping his historical moment, “to mention but one, is the *Quixote* itself” (93). If the text did not automatically break from the context of its creation, it would be unreadable in its origin, even for its author, who would watch it instantaneously seal itself off from reading the moment it was written. That there is reading at all proves that the text can and must set foot in our “context,” whatever and wherever that is, even as the text constructs part of that context, without ever belonging to it wholly or exclusively.

 With this understanding of text and context, we can see why the meaning of text is no more dependent on the reader. The values of context-dependence and reader-dependence are in fact opposed when the latter is formulated as an active role of the reader. If the meaning of a reading depends on that reading’s context, then the reader has no freedom whatsoever in the act of reading, and the text will either appear to them in the present, fully formed context, or not at all. If we question the bond of context, we should not do so in the direction of thinking that the death of the author is the birth of the reader, that the reader is now free to choose among contexts and readings. The reader already finds themselves implicated in the text and as a node in the interpretation that the text makes possible. Among the many ways our “context” depends on and is co-constructed by any text it encounters would be the necessity of positing our context against another context, for example that of the *Quixote* (sketched by our narrator as a time period, a language, a religion, the wars among cultures, an author). To read the *Quixote* as a twentieth-century French symbolist, or a twenty-first century literary critic, one must first read it as something else, one must read everything one does against what one assumes to be the proper, original, authorial context of that work, which means that *both* the “original” context and my own *are given to me by the text*. The reader is a gift of the text. This does not mean that the text becomes a sovereign lord that reads and worships itself eternally; the free play and dissemination of interpretation, gestured towards in the story’s final paragraph, still remains alongside any attempt at an authoritative reading; one is not possible without the other. We will never have finished sorting author from reader, text from context, such that any term would stand on its own. To see that Borges understood this problem of reading, that he saw the reader sinking into the web of the text, it is enough to remember that the two narrators whose stories we have recited here, whose ignorance Borges himself did not feel he was able to overcome, are both—librarian and critic—cast in the role of the reader.[[16]](#footnote-16)

 This brief glimpse at two of Borges’s fictions suggests broader strategies of reading for his trickster’s corpus. An irony of narrative form can be found in most of his stories, at least from the period of *Ficciones* and *El Aleph*, and his essays, lectures, and interviews, his writings where he takes positions and makes assertions, should be read always with an eye to how he contradicts and undermines those positions in other work, non-fictional or fictional. This approach offers a counterbalance to the attempts to read his body of work as an expression of philosophy or a religious mysticism. His interest in skepticism, idealism, and nominalism is perhaps limited to the force of negation these doctrines offer toward other philosophical doctrines, an interest he will not carry to the point of becoming a doctrinal thinker himself. And the expressions of romantico-mystical unity in his stories and essays can always be found to be undermined by irony and self-contradiction. Ana María Barrenechea expresses something like this when she says that Borges’s work “does not contain the coherent evolution of metaphysical thought nor a doctrine,” and that he “create[s] a literature out of literature and philosophy” (144). Jaime Alazraki’s suggestion that Borges’s Cabbalistic play does without monotheism opens the infinite possibilities of meaning and being onto an abyss, severing them from the ground of a divine intention. To suggest that Borges’s writing must be read as literature, rather than philosophy or mysticism, is to suggest that it *must be read*. Perhaps more than any author before him, or at least in a way that awakened our sensitivity to all his precursors, he played with the possibilities of textuality that condition what we know as literature. As well as philosophy, theology, science, history…

JB, Atlanta, 2018

*Postscriptum* *. . . And if it were possible to read any text, that of Borges or even this here, as written by the other? As inscrutable as the most esoteric sacred text, one could only intimate its author’s voice by interpreting their resounding silence. Simultaneously more and less sovereign than the God who appeared to Job to declare His own unintelligibility, dividing and multiplying the figure of sovereignty, this other author or other of the author would promise neither revelation or transcendence, would play at appearing in order to play at disappearing, could not even guarantee whether it gave or received pleasure or pain in this strange game played by all and none. Does it call for or remain indifferent to the reading of the other? That reader who is never there where we are, who seems as close as the text we hold, part of that very text, and yet who we can only watch recede endlessly in time and space, only ever to be found in another context…*

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1. I have written at greater length about the various forms of irony in this story in *Tar for Mortar: “The Library of Babel” and the Dream of Totality*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From the many authors who have touched on this story, the only explicit doubt of the narrator I have come across is in Kane X. Faucher’s “The Effect of the Atomist Clinamen in the Constitution of Borges’s ‘Library of Babel’” and Neil Badmington’s “Babelation.” Emir Rodriguez Monegal mentions in passing that the story “satirizes the concept of a total library” (89), but does not expand on this suggestion. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is never a given in the case of Borges’s “non-fiction,” but it does in fact appear that this citation is legitimate. See chapter 2, stanza 2 of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (100). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kane X. Faucher, in “A Few Ruminations on Borges’s Notions of Library and Metaphor,” suggests that the library’s character set must be the Hebrew alphabet. This assumption not only elides the questions raised by the implied transliteration of the manuscript of “The Library of Babel,” but also ignores the complex textual history traced in “The Total Library” of authors attempting to reduce the Roman alphabet to these proportions—authors including Borges himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Both the “*símbolos suficientes*” and the wording and colon of the last phrase “*todo lo que es dable expresar: en todas las lenguas*” recall exact phrases from the “The Library of Babel.” Interestingly, both phrases educe the aversion of translators, here and in most translations of the short story. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. He is also the only translator who retains the ambiguity of the phrase from the opening sentence, “con vastos pozos de ventilación en el medio.” The other translators are split on disambiguating this to mean either that there are vast ventilation pits in the middle of each hexagon, or one pit in between several hexagons. See the opening section of the first chapter of *Tar for Mortar* for illustrations of what the resulting architecture might resemble. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Julio Prieto interprets the story as a critique of Argentinian literary circles—but doesn’t read it as ironic. He takes the narrator’s (prejudiced) criticisms of Madame Henri Bachelier to be Borges’s critique of Argentina’s literary circles, on the basis of Borges’s disdain for Victoria Ocampo’s Frenchified literary tastes. While there is ample reason to think that Borges had Argentinian society in mind, this connection should start from the ironic, implicit critique of the story’s narrator, not his literal criticisms of Madame Bachelier. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Borges’s review of Ludendorff’s journal, *The Sacred Source of German Might,* in *El Hogar*33.1455 (3 September 1937), p. 30, mentions his prejudices against freemasons, protestants, and Jews, prejudices shared by the narrator of “Pierre Menard” (*Textos Cautivos* 165). Borges also wrote a review of Ludendorff’s *Total War* in *El Hogar*34.1475 (21 January 1938), p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Spirit as a universal and trans-historical author forms the subject of Gerard Genette’s elegant essay on Borges, “L’utopie littéraire.” He reads the erudition of Borges’s essays, constantly finding the predecessors of every seemingly novel idea, as an endless proof of the phenomenality of individual authorship. His most explicit thesis gathers Borges’s corpus on the side of this unity. However, he also considers many of the essays and phrases that demonstrate Borges’s equally prevalent drive toward self-contradiction and dissemination. While I would take issue with his literal reading of “The Library of Babel,” on which he relies to posit an idea of literature as perfect and eternal, he nonetheless posits on the side of the human being an “imperfection” that turns literature into an infinite task of inadequation. In the end, it is impossible to say whether he has produced the most or least faithful reading of Borges, which may be the surest sign that one has remained true to Borges’s auto-infidelity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the relationship of Menard’s practice to translation, see Sergio Waisman’s *Borges and Translation*, pp. 93-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, M. Ayelen Sanchez, *Fantasía e ironía*, pp. 27-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Most commentary refers to this as Menard’s “invisible work,” though the phrase never appears in the story. The narrator refers to Menard’s published writings as his “*visible* work,” but refers to his efforts with the *Quixote* as “*la otra: la subterránea, la interminablemente heroica, la impar. También, ¡ay de las posibilidades del hombre!, la inconclusa*” (45). In Hurley’s translation, “the other, the subterranean, the interminably heroic production—the *oeuvre nonpareil*, the *oeuvre* that must remain—for such are our human limitations!—unfinished” (90). (Curiously, Hurley’s imposition of the word “production” puts a stop to the “interminability” suggested by the original, and his translation of *posibilidades* (possibilities) as “limitations” similarly converts an openness on the future into a restriction.) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jauss exemplifies a misreading of “Pierre Menard” of which Efraín Kristal (in his UCLA Lecture) was rightly critical. Kristal points to the many readers of the story who take the narrator’s opinion of Menard’s *Quixote,* that it is richer than the original, as Borges’s own opinion. As opposed to seeing this difference-from-self in the original (or the absence of any original), this reading has the effect of stabilizing the context of reception: “The identical text has become incomparably richer and more complex after 300 years […] for Borges, this statement [“truth, whose mother is history…”] had taken on the proportions of a stupendous idea by Ménard’s [*sic*]time” (67). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Dapía suggests that Menard pushes us beyond Jauss’s framework, which tends toward the fusion of author’s and reader’s horizons, toward the possibility of an infinite number of attributions and frameworks. However, she still insists on the values of context and reader, “Borges himself acknowledges the importance of the frame of reference within which the reader is positioned when interpreting a literary work […] For his part, Menard does not seem to find any convincing reason for choosing to pursue the author’s intention instead of taking into account the reader’s intention” (103). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. We should also recall, from “Kafka and his Precursors,” that future texts will form part of any present or past context. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. There are statements in Borges’s essays that seem, on the other hand, more amenable to the reader-response perspective. For example, in “For Bernard Shaw,” Borges offers as the reason for the differing-from-self (“inexhaustibility”) of the individual text its infinite dialogue with the reader. “One literature differs from another, either before or after it, not so much because of the text as for the manner in which it is read. If I were able to read any contemporary page—this one for example—as it would be read in the year 2000, I would know what literature would be like in the year 2000” (164). As is always the case though, Borges emphasizes or stabilizes a certain position or assertion when its destabilizing potential is greatest, only to destabilize it elsewhere when necessary. Apart from texts like “Coleridge’s Flower” and “Kafka and his Precursors” that destabilize the individual author by stabilizing other authorial positions, one can turn to Borges’s fiction, as we do here, to see how the role of reader is destabilized there. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)